

Oct 21, 2026

· Paid

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Sam guided his Porsche Macan through the evening traffic. The dashboard clock read 8:37 PM. Thursday night had settled over the city with the promise of something electric in the air, or maybe that was just the anticipation blooming in Sam's chest.

"How much farther?" Sam's coworker Jimmy Hansen asked from the passenger seat, drumming his fingers on his thigh.

"About five minutes," Sam replied, glancing in the rearview mirror at their two guests in the back seat. "You guys doing okay back there?"

Arjun Mehta, a slender man with thoughtful eyes, nodded. "Just wondering what exactly I'm about to walk into." His voice carried the cadence of someone who had arrived from Mumbai. "My exposure to establishments of this nature has been... theoretical at best."

"He means he's never been to a strip club," Jimmy translated unnecessarily, twisting around to grin at their clients. "Don't worry, me and Sam were there last night. We'll show you the ropes."

"I've been to strip clubs," Gerry Hale interjected, his tone defensive. The procurement director sat with his shoulders squared.

Sam smoothly navigated a turn. "Elysium isn't like regular strip clubs. The VIP section is quiet enough for actual conversation. It's exclusive, discreet, the kind of place where business actually gets done."

"Where's Frankie tonight?" Arjun asked.

"Kid's birthday party," Sam answered.

Jimmy snorted. "His loss. Last night was just the warm-up. Apparently, Thursday nights are when they bring out the premium talent."

"Premium talent," Arjun repeated. "And the etiquette here. What's expected? I don't want to offend anyone or break rules I don't know about."

"Just relax," Jimmy said, reaching back to clap Arjun on the knee. "I'll walk you through it. The dancers approach you, not the other way around. No touching unless they initiate or

give permission. And remember, these women are professionals who make more money than most Wall Street brokers.”

“They certainly charge like it,” Gerry muttered, his frugal procurement instincts clearly troubled.

Sam caught Gerry’s eye in the mirror. “Don’t worry about the expense report. Tonight’s on the company. Consider it relationship building.”

The car fell quiet for a moment as Sam navigated through a series of turns, bringing them closer to their destination. His mind drifted to the phone call he’d made that morning. Vincent had answered with that same professional tone.

“Mr. Stafford, good to hear from you. Did you enjoy your evening with us?”

“Very much. I wanted to thank you for the hospitality, and also ask... I have some clients in from Seattle tonight. Would it be possible to bring them by?”

“Thursdays are typically reserved for established members, but I believe we can make an exception. The standard fee applies, of course. Five thousand per guest for access to the VIP floor.”

“Perfect. We’ll be there.”

The memory dissolved as Sam focused on his driving, but another thought replaced it, one that had been circling his mind all day. According to what Wendy had told him last night, the two blonde VIP dancers worked Thursday through Saturday. That meant that tonight would be his first chance to actually see Evie at Elysium, to confirm what she was doing there, to see what this undercover work really entailed.

Her three months were almost up, as she’d indicated, so his window was closing fast.

The Porsche’s dashboard lit up with an incoming call, the name “Joe” flashing on the display. Sam hovered his finger over the steering wheel button before pressing decline.

Jimmy glanced at the screen. “Who’s Joe?”

“Just a friend,” Sam replied. “I’ll call him back later.”

Elysium appeared ahead. Sam pulled up to the valet stand, where a young man approached.

“Welcome to Elysium, sir.”

Sam handed over the keys along with a crisp fifty. “Take care of her.”

The valet nodded, pocketing the bill. “Always, sir.”

As the four men stepped onto the curb, Sam registered that the line stretched longer than it had the previous evening. At least thirty men and women in suits and dresses waited their turn.

"That's quite a queue," Arjun observed.

"Thursday crowd," Jimmy explained. "Weekend starts early for the finance guys."

Sam checked his phone. Joe had tried calling again. "Look, I need to return this call. Why don't you guys get in line? I'll be right back."

Sam stepped away toward a quieter corner near the edge of the valet stand, still close enough to keep an eye on his group. The bass throbbed in the background as he dialed Joe's number.

Joe answered on the first ring. "Sam?"

The distress in his friend's voice sent a chill through Sam. "Hey, what's going on?"

"They're fucking extending it!" Joe's words tumbled out. "Three more fucking months, Sam."

"Wait, slow down buddy. What exactly happened? Start from the beginning."

"There's not much to tell. I was doing the dishes when a guy knocks on my door. He shows me his badge, says he's FBI, says Evie's assignment has been extended three months. Wouldn't tell me anything else. Where she is, if she's safe, nothing. He was here less than a minute."

"Are you sure it was the FBI? Did you get a good look at the badge?"

"For about five seconds," Joe replied, frustration evident. "It looked real. Had the seal and everything."

Sam pressed further, his investigator's instincts kicking in despite the conflict swirling inside him. "Did he give you his name? A card? A number to call?"

"No name, no card, no number, nothing." Joe's voice cracked slightly. "I was doing so fucking well, Sam. Counting down the weeks. And now it's three more fucking months? I don't even know if she's okay."

"If they're extending her assignment, she must be okay," Sam said, trying to sound reassuring while his mind raced.

This information confirmed what he'd suspected but kept doubting, that Evie really was working for the FBI. The story she'd told him contained at least some truth.

“Look, Joe, try to relax. Do something physical. Go for a run, hit the gym. I’ll come by tomorrow evening and we can grab dinner or beers, okay?”

Joe’s sigh carried a note of his surrender. “Yeah, okay. Sorry for dumping this on you.”

“Don’t apologize. That’s what friends are for.”

They hung up, and Sam stood motionless for a moment, processing. The guilt of lying to Joe layered over confirmation. Three months extended to six, exactly as Evie had told him might happen that night at his apartment. She’d been telling the truth about that, at least. The FBI was real. The extension was real.

He looked toward the entrance of Elysium, where his colleagues waited in line. He could leave now, make up an excuse about Joe having an emergency. The clients would be disappointed, but they’d survive.

But confirming Evie worked for the FBI didn’t answer what she was actually doing inside Elysium’s VIP section. After what he’d experienced with Doe last night in the private room, he couldn’t shake his suspicions.

No amount of bonus money should be enough for Evie to be sexual with other men. Not when Joe waited at home, counting the days until her return. He told himself this was for Joe, that uncovering the truth would help his friend somehow.

He forced a smile and rejoined the group, now several places closer to the front of the line.

“Everything okay?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah, just a friend having a rough night,” Sam replied, then shifted topics. “So, Arjun, Jimmy told me you studied at MIT?”

Arjun nodded, clearly grateful for the conversational lifeline. “Computational mathematics. Most people’s eyes glaze over when I explain what I actually do.”

“He makes computers predict when people will buy shit,” Jimmy translated with a grin.

“And he’s damn good at it.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite that way,” Arjun said, “but essentially correct.”

Gerry checked his watch. “How long is this going to take? I have a seven AM call with Tokyo tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam assured him, “we’re VIP. We’ll be upstairs in ten minutes.”

As they approached the entrance, a massive bouncer checked their IDs before waving them through. The sensory shift hit Sam just as it had the night before, the heat, the bass now full-bodied instead of muffled, the neon-painted darkness, and the press of bodies. Arjun and Gerry froze momentarily as they took in the main floor.

“Jesus,” Gerry murmured.

“This way,” Sam said, placing a hand lightly on Gerry’s shoulder to steer him forward. He navigated them through the crowd toward the VIP staircase where Marcus stood at his podium, tablet in hand.

“Good evening,” Sam said as they approached. “Sam Stafford and guests.”

Marcus nodded in recognition and checked his tablet. Finding what he sought, he lifted a radio to his mouth. “Stafford party of four at the stairs. Returning plus two.”

After a brief wait, Vincent appeared. His smile was professional but genuine as he recognized Sam and Jimmy.

“Mr. Stafford, Mr. Hansen, welcome back. And welcome to your guests.”

“This is Arjun Mehta and Gerald Hale,” Sam introduced. “They’re in town from Seattle for a software implementation.”

“A pleasure,” Vincent said. “Please, follow me. The paperwork won’t take long.”

He led them to the same back office where Sam and Jimmy had signed their agreements the night before. The room felt smaller with five of them inside, the desk and leather chairs taking on an almost interrogation-room quality under the soft lighting.

“Gentlemen,” Vincent addressed Arjun and Gerry, “as new visitors, we require you to sign our standard membership agreements and non-disclosure forms. Mr. Stafford and Mr. Hansen, as you signed yesterday, you’re already in our system.”

Vincent slid documents across the desk. Arjun picked his up first, eyes scanning the text. Gerry followed more cautiously, reading each line with the attention of someone who reviewed contracts for a living.

“The key points,” Vincent explained, “are straightforward. No photography or recording of any kind. No sharing information about other guests you might recognize. No discussion of the club with non-members. Violations result in permanent ban and potential legal action.”

“What constitutes ‘sharing information’?” Arjun asked, pointing to a specific paragraph.

“This language seems broad.”

“It means that if you see someone you recognize up there, you didn’t see them,” Vincent clarified. “What happens at Elysium remains private, for everyone’s protection, including yours.”

Gerry continued reading while Arjun signed his form with a quick, decisive stroke.

“The access fee is five thousand dollars per person,” Vincent continued. “This covers entry only. Everything else, drinks, private dances, room rentals, is charged separately.”

“Twenty thousand dollars... just to walk upstairs?” Gerry asked, looking up from his paperwork.

Sam interjected. “We like to treat our clients well. It’s an investment in our relationship.” He gave Gerry a look that implied the expense was well covered and worth every penny. Jimmy backed him up. “Trust me, once you’re up there, you won’t be thinking about the cost.”

Gerry hesitated a moment longer before signing. Sam pulled out the company card and handed it to Vincent, who processed the payment.

“Transaction approved,” Vincent confirmed. “Thank you, Mr. Stafford.”

Sam nodded, mentally tallying the mounting expenses. Last night’s five thousand from his personal account. A couple thousand more for the drinks and the private dance. Now twenty thousand on the company card. Justifying this on the expense report would require creative categorization, but that was a problem for tomorrow.

“Your group received positive mentions from our staff last night,” Vincent noted as he led them back toward the staircase. “We appreciate guests who understand the nature of our establishment.”

The comment landed exactly as intended, a quiet reinforcement that management saw Sam as a valuable regular, someone worth cultivating. Sam felt a flush of pride despite himself.

They reached the stairs where Marcus stepped aside, gesturing for them to ascend. The four men climbed in single file, Sam leading the way. With each step, his heart rate increased. If Evie was working tonight, she would see him with clients. What would she do? How would he react?

At the top of the stairs, Sam paused with his hand on the door.

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Sam pushed open the door, and the world changed. The thundering bass from the main floor receded to a dignified pulse that vibrated just below consciousness. Amber and gold lighting replaced the strobing neons, casting everyone in the room in their most flattering glow. Even the air felt several degrees cooler.

Jimmy let out a low whistle behind him. "Now this is what I call an upgrade."

Sam stepped forward to make room for his colleagues. Arjun and Gerry lingered in the doorway, visibly processing. The VIP floor operated on different physics than the world below. Here, women in evening gowns glided across polished hardwood instead of writhing on poles. Conversations happened at normal volume. Glasses clinked without urgency.

"My God," Arjun murmured, stepping through.

Sam's attention was elsewhere. His eyes swept left to right. Twenty guests, perhaps. Eight dancers working the room, the bartender arranging glassware, the security personnel stationed discreetly at key points, but no Evie.

A tall blonde crossed the floor in a deep green gown, drawing Sam's attention. His pulse quickened, then settled just as quickly as he registered the green eyes, sharp cheekbones, the features of a stranger.

Was Evie even here? Wendy had told him both blondes worked Thursday through Saturday. But what if she'd quit? What if the FBI had pulled her? What if something had happened? Or what if she'd taken the day off?

"This way," Sam said, guiding his group toward the bar.

George greeted them with a nod of recognition. "Mr. Stafford, Mr. Hansen. Welcome back."

"Good evening," Sam replied. "Macallan 18, neat."

Jimmy ordered a whiskey sour. Arjun hesitated, scanning the backlit bottles.

"I'll have what he's having," he said, gesturing toward Sam.

Gerry checked the leather-bound menu, eyebrows lifting slightly. "Club soda with lime."

As George prepared their drinks, Jimmy rocked on his heels, grinning at their guests.

"So? Worth the price of admission?"

Arjun nodded, his gaze following a woman in a silver gown. "I've never seen anything like this. How does it work, exactly? Do we choose someone, or do they choose us?"

"Both," Jimmy explained. "The dancers circulate. They'll approach if they're interested. You can request someone specific, but there's no guarantee."

"And the rates?" Gerry asked, his procurement director instincts evident.

"We should grab a table," Jimmy suggested instead of answering directly. "The dancers are more likely to stop by if we're seated."

Sam paid for the round and followed Jimmy to a semicircular booth with burgundy leather upholstery. He deliberately took the end seat, positioning himself for maximum visibility of the floor. Each new figure that entered his field of vision triggered a moment of anticipation, followed by disappointment.

Jimmy leaned in. "Man, you seem tense. Relax. This is supposed to be fun."

"I'm fine," Sam said, taking a sip of scotch.

Joe's call resurfaced in his mind. Three more months. He wondered if Evie knew yet, wondered if she'd requested the extension herself.

"Sam and Jimmy!" A familiar voice pulled him back to the present. Wendy approached their table, Doe at her side. Both wore different dresses than the night before, Wendy in burgundy, Doe in sapphire blue. "Back so soon?"

Jimmy grinned. "Couldn't stay away."

"We brought friends this time," Sam added, gesturing to Arjun and Gerry.

"We can see that," Doe said, her gaze appraising the newcomers. "Still celebrating that successful business quarter?"

"Always something to celebrate," Jimmy replied.

"Where's your other friend?" Wendy asked. "Frank, was it?"

"Frankie. His kid's birthday party," Jimmy explained. "He's heartbroken to miss this."

"I bet he is," Wendy laughed, then turned to Arjun and Gerry. "I'm Wendy, and this is Doe. Welcome to Elysium."

Introductions circled the table. Arjun stammered slightly when shaking Doe's hand. Gerry maintained professionalism, as if at a corporate meet-and-greet.

The women settled into the booth. Sam felt Wendy lean toward him, her perfume subtle but expensive.

“Both blondes are in tonight, you know,” she murmured.

“I only see one.”

“The other’s freshening up. She’ll be out shortly.”

His glass froze halfway to his mouth.

“So,” Arjun asked Wendy, his curiosity apparently overcoming his nervousness, “how did you come to work here? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Wendy smiled. “Not at all. Officially, I’m a marketing consultant. That’s what my family thinks I do.” She sipped her champagne. “Three years in, and my mother still asks me to help with her social media campaigns.”

Sam found himself analyzing her answer. Marketing consultant, a cover story for family, another woman living in layers just like Evie. He wondered how many stories these women maintained at the same time, how they kept them straight, how they decided which parts of themselves to reveal to whom.

“What’s a typical Thursday like around here?” Gerry asked, seeming to warm slightly as he sipped his club soda.

“Business crowd early,” Doe explained, crossing her legs. “Regular members later.”

“What about the other days?” Gerry asked.

“Wednesdays are warm-ups. Thursdays through Saturdays are peak nights. Sundays are quieter, industry people mostly.”

Jimmy leaned toward Wendy. “You free later? I’ve been thinking about that dance all day.”

“For you? I might make time,” she teased. “Let me check my schedule.”

The girls stayed a few minutes longer, then excused themselves with promises to return. As they departed, Sam watched them work the room, stopping at other tables.

“So,” Jimmy said, “private dances.” He explained the logistics to Arjun and Gerry. “Eight hundred for thirty minutes, fifteen hundred for an hour. The Lotus Rooms are completely private. No touching unless they initiate it or give permission.”

“And what exactly happens in these private sessions?” Arjun asked.

“Dancing. Conversation. Whatever you negotiate within the rules,” Jimmy said. “They set the limits.”

“And this is expensable?” Gerry asked, eyeing the prices on the drink menu.

“Company card,” Sam confirmed, though he knew the accounting department would have questions. He’d worry about that tomorrow.

The conversation continued, but Sam participated mechanically, nodding at appropriate intervals while his attention remained on the floor. Ten minutes passed before Wendy reappeared. This time, she wasn’t alone.

Sam turned his head to take a look and the world slowed to a crawl.

She wore deep velvet, a midnight blue that absorbed light. The neckline dipped in a tasteful V, edged with black lace that continued down the long sleeves. Her blonde hair fell past her shoulders, styled to look effortless but clearly the work of a professional. Smoky eyeshadow accentuated her eyes, making them appear larger, more luminous. Deep wine-colored lips completed the transformation.

It was Evie. But it wasn’t.

Sam had known Evie for years. He’d seen her dressed up for holidays and special occasions. He’d seen her sick with the flu, wrapped in Joe’s ratty college sweatshirt. He’d seen her laugh until she cried.

He had never seen her like this.

His first, unbidden thought was that she was the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. She looked sultry, sophisticated, untouchable. The second thought was dread, spreading cold through his chest.

Nothing about her was Evie. It went beyond the dress and makeup. Her posture was different, spine straighter, shoulders back, chin tilted at a confident angle. She moved differently, each step deliberate, unhurried.

And her ring finger was bare. No ring, no tan line or indentation where one had been, nothing to suggest she belonged to anyone.

Sam felt sick.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” she said, extending her hand to the table. “I’m Destiny.”

Wendy made introductions around the table. When she reached Sam, Evie, no, Destiny, repeated his name.

“Sam,” she said, as if tasting an unfamiliar word.

No flicker of recognition crossed her face. No hesitation, nothing to indicate she had ever met him before this moment.

She slid into the booth next to Wendy, crossing her legs. "What brings you all to Miami?"

"We're local," Jimmy explained, indicating himself and Sam. "These guys are visiting from Seattle. Business trip."

"Software implementation," Arjun added. "I work in computational mathematics."

Interest flickered across Destiny's face. "Predictive modeling?"

"That's right," he answered.

"How do you account for outliers in your datasets?" she asked.

Arjun straightened, visibly surprised. "We use modified robust regression methods, actually. Most systems throw out the outliers, but that's where you find the most interesting patterns."

"The signal in the noise," she agreed. "Fascinating work."

Gerry watched her with new respect. Sam couldn't help but stare, searching for glimpses of the woman he knew in this stranger's face. He found none.

Jimmy leaned forward, grinning. "I've been waiting all my life for a date with Destiny."

She laughed, that new laugh that wasn't exactly hers. "You're not the first to use that line tonight."

"Is that a no?" Jimmy pressed.

"I'm very selective about whom I give my time to," she replied, her tone teasing but firm.

Sam felt a flash of possessiveness that confused him. She wasn't his to claim, in any capacity. She was Joe's wife, his friend's wife. So why did he want to tell Jimmy to back off?

"And what do you do, Sam?" Destiny asked, turning those unfamiliar eyes toward him.

"Software sales," he answered.

She nodded, as if he'd said something only mildly interesting, and redirected her attention to Arjun. "How long are you in town?"

The conversation flowed around him. Sam watched Destiny navigate the social dynamics effortlessly. She seemed comfortable here, at ease in a way he had never seen before. She laughed at Jimmy's jokes, asked Arjun insightful questions about his work, even drew Gerry out of his shell with a question about Seattle's tech industry.

Not once did she give any sign that she recognized him. Not a glance, not a slip, not a moment of hesitation.

“Well, gentlemen,” she said after fifteen minutes, “it’s been lovely meeting you all. I hope I’ll see you later this evening.” She stood, smoothing her dress. “Wendy can help you arrange anything you’d like.”

With that, she and Wendy departed, moving on to another table across the room.

Sam exhaled. He felt shaken, disoriented, as if he’d stepped into some parallel universe where Evie Sinclair had never existed.

This wasn’t a disguise or a performance laid over the woman he knew. It was a separate person entirely. Destiny didn’t just look different, she moved differently, thought differently, responded differently. She carried herself like someone who had lived in this skin for years.

He could instantly see why the FBI had recruited her. She was a natural.

“Another round?” Jimmy suggested, breaking into Sam’s thoughts.

“Sounds good,” Sam agreed.

As Jimmy ordered through a passing server, Arjun leaned in. “That Destiny is something else. Not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” Sam asked, curious.

“I don’t know. Someone less... substantial?” Arjun shrugged. “She knew about regression modeling. That’s not exactly common knowledge.”

“You thinking of booking time with her?” Jimmy asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Arjun blushed. “I was considering it.”

“I’m thinking of seeing Wendy again,” Jimmy said. “Last night was just a taste.”

Sam tuned out their conversation, his attention drawn across the room where Destiny now stood talking with a silver-haired man in an expensive suit. She laughed at something he said, touching his arm briefly. The man looked pleased with himself.

The back of Sam’s neck prickled with unease. What exactly was Evie doing here? Gathering intelligence, yes, but how? What lines was she crossing to get what the FBI needed?

He recalled Doe’s words from the previous night, describing the Lotus Rooms. No cameras, no recording, no monitoring. Total privacy.

The realization struck him suddenly. If he wanted answers, that was where he would get them. The Lotus Rooms were the only place he could speak to Evie without being

watched or recorded, the only place he could ask what the hell was going on.

But beneath that justification lurked something else. He wanted to see her, to touch her, to be alone with her, to break through that Destiny persona and find Evie underneath.

The desire for Evie wrestled with concern for Joe, with loyalty to his friend.

"I'm going to book some time with Destiny," Sam announced, interrupting whatever Jimmy had been saying.

Jimmy raised his eyebrows. "Bold move. She seems pretty exclusive."

"Won't know unless I try," Sam replied.

Ten minutes passed before he saw his opportunity. Destiny finished with a client and headed to the bar, signaling George for a drink. Sam stood from the table and moved in, timing his approach so he reached her just as George set a glass of liquid with lime in front of her.

"Destiny," Sam said, stopping a respectful distance away.

She turned, professional smile in place. "Sam, wasn't it? How are you enjoying your evening?"

"Very much," he replied. "I was hoping to book some private time with you."

Her eyes hardened for a split second. "I'm not sure that's possible tonight. My schedule is quite full."

"I insist," Sam said.

Destiny sipped her drink, studying him over the rim of her glass. When she set it down, her decision seemed made.

"Five thousand dollars," she said. "For thirty minutes."

Sam blinked. "I was quoted eight hundred last night."

"Our rates are individual," she replied. "And non-negotiable."

Frustration simmered beneath Sam's calm exterior. She was pricing him out deliberately, trying to deter him without causing a scene.

"Five thousand," he repeated. "Fine."

Something like surprise crossed her features before the mask slipped back into place.

Her gaze flicked briefly toward George, who was polishing glasses towards the far end of the bar, his attention seemingly focused on his work.

“Very well,” she said. “I have an opening in ten minutes. I’ll find you.” She picked up her drink and walked away without another glance.

Sam flagged George and ordered another scotch. He stared at the hallway leading to the Lotus Rooms.

What would he say when that door closed behind them? What could he say? He had no plan, only questions and a growing sense that he was crossing a line he couldn’t uncross.

He took a sip of his scotch, then watched as a server collected empty glasses from nearby tables.

Jimmy caught his eye from across the room and gave him a thumbs up. Sam nodded back, feeling like an imposter.

Ten minutes passed with excruciating slowness. Sam checked his watch twice, then forced himself to stop. He nursed his scotch and tried to appear relaxed while his heart hammered in his chest.

Then Destiny appeared at the edge of his vision, moving through the lounge. She stopped beside him without a word and extended her hand.

Sam set down his glass and took her hand. Her grip was firm, cool, completely impersonal. She led him across the floor toward the corridor.

They passed through the archway into the dimly lit hallway. Doors lined both sides, spaced well apart.

Destiny stopped at Room Three and produced a key card from somewhere in her dress. The lock clicked. She pushed the door open and pulled him inside, releasing his hand only when they were both across the threshold.

The door closed behind them.

Sam opened his mouth, the question already forming. “What the fuck, Evie?” but before he could speak, she raised one finger and pressed it against her lips.

She then closed the distance between them until her body was inches from his. She leaned in, her lips nearly touching his ear. “Not a word,” she whispered.

She pulled back just enough to meet his eyes for a brief moment. Her expression was unreadable. Then she turned away, moving to the control panel mounted on the wall.

Her fingers moved across the touchscreen. Music began playing, something with a heavy bass line that filled the room. She turned the volume up, then up again, until the bass pulsed through the floor and walls, loud enough that conversation would require raised voices.

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Destiny turned away from the control panel, moving to the bar without acknowledging him. Nothing about her suggested the woman who used to show up at their Sunday lunches in yoga pants and Joe's oversized college sweatshirt, laughing at her own terrible cooking stories.

Sam hovered near the door, unsure what to do with himself. He took in the room, the circular burgundy bed dominating the far wall, the curved black leather sofas, the bar tucked into the corner. The same layout he'd seen with Doe the night before, yet now the space felt charged with different energy.

He looked toward Destiny at the bar, waiting for direction. Her back was to him, her attention fixed on the bottles lining the wall as if studying each label. After several seconds of being ignored, he drifted to the sofa and sat at the end rather than settling in. From there, he watched her.

Destiny selected two heavy crystal tumblers. She picked through the ice with silver tongs, chose a twist of orange peel, and wiped the rim of a glass with a black cloth. Each motion seemed designed to consume time, to postpone whatever came next.

When she finally approached, she carried a single glass of scotch. Macallan 18, neat, his order from earlier. She hadn't asked what he wanted. She'd apparently been watching him, studying him, since he'd walked in. The realization landed somewhere between flattering and unsettling.

She extended the glass, her face impassive. Sam took it, noting that she hadn't poured anything for herself.

She then sat beside him on the sofa, maintaining a foot of space between them.

The music throbbed around them, making conversation impossible without shouting. That was clearly the point.

She held her palm out and mouthed a single word. "Phone."

Sam hesitated, raising an eyebrow. The look in her eyes wasn't Destiny's gaze. It was the first glimpse of Evie he'd seen all night, direct and impatient but familiar. He reached

into his pocket and handed over his iPhone.

The screen lit up as she took it. His lock screen featured a photo of a sunset over Biscayne Bay that he'd taken last summer, but it was the notifications that mattered.

Joe: 1 missed call

Sam watched her eyes track to it immediately. Her thumb, already moving toward the screen to unlock it, stopped. The pause lasted maybe half a second, no more, but Sam saw her see the notification.

She swiped up and the phone requested authentication. She turned the screen toward him.

Sam used his index finger to enter his passcode, and the phone unlocked.

Destiny turned the phone around and began typing. Her thumbs moved fast at first, then stopped. She stared at the screen for a moment. Deleted something. Started again. Sam watched the micro-movements of her face, the tiny compression of her lips, the brief flutter of her eyelashes. Whatever she wanted to say wasn't coming easily.

She typed more, then paused again. Backspaced. She glanced at him, her expression unreadable, then returned her attention to the screen. More typing, faster now, as if she'd made a decision about what to commit to text.

She finally turned the screen toward him.

Fuck you. I told you to never come back. This room may be bugged. Say nothing. 4am your place

Sam read it twice. The "Fuck you" almost made him smile. It was the most honest thing she'd communicated all night. The "4am your place" felt like a small victory. She would be coming to him, on his turf, where he wouldn't have to navigate the minefield of Elysium.

When he nodded his acceptance, she pulled the phone back and deleted the note, then handed the phone back.

Disappointment settled in his gut. He'd come here ready for confrontation, prepared to demand answers about what she was doing, what lines she was crossing. Instead, the reckoning was postponed, delayed another five hours during which he'd have to imagine all possible versions of their conversation.

But he understood her reasoning. If the room was wired, anything real he said could put her at risk. Or worse.

Destiny leaned forward slightly. "So, Sam," she said, voice pitched to carry over the music without shouting. "Tell me about yourself."

Sam stared at her for a moment. This was absurd. She knew most things about him already, where he worked, what he did for fun, even his terrible habit of showing up late to every group dinner. Now she sat across from him with perfect posture and an expectant smile, waiting for him to recite his resume.

He played his part as the client, the mark. "Software sales. Enterprise accounts. I convince people to spend money on problems they didn't know they had."

"And do they have these problems?" she asked, crossing her legs and angling toward him.

"They do by the time I'm done."

She smiled. "Persuasive."

"It's a gift," Sam replied.

"Does anyone tolerate this gift? A wife? A girlfriend?"

"No wife. No girlfriend." He held her gaze. "No complications."

"How long have you been in Miami, Sam?"

"My entire life. Born and raised."

"A local. That's rare here. Most people are from somewhere else."

"What about you?" Sam asked. "Where's Destiny from?"

"Tampa originally," she said without hesitation. "Came here for a fresh start."

"Running from something?"

"Toward something," she corrected. "There's a difference."

Sam checked his watch subtly. Ten minutes gone. He was spending five thousand dollars for Tampa origin stories and fresh start philosophy.

"You have that sales voice," she observed. "Do you ever turn it off?"

"Only when I sleep," he said. "What about Destiny? Does she ever take a night off?"

"Sometimes," she replied. "But I won't go into detail. I like to keep some mystery... makes the time here more special."

She's good, he thought. But let's see her handle a straight question.

He decided to test her. "I paid five grand for a real private experience," he said, letting his tone suggest disappointment. "Not just conversation."

Her expression didn't change.

"I spent time with Doe last night," he continued, choosing his words carefully. "It was more personal than I expected. She took her time, made it worth the investment. Is that what you do?"

She answered without hesitation. "Every girl has her own comfort level," she said. "I don't usually do privates. That's why my price is what it is."

Sam was certain she was lying. She'd quoted him the astronomical figure to drive him away, not because she regularly charged that amount. But he had no way to prove it, and no way to ask the questions he really wanted answers to. "What do you actually do in these rooms? How far do you go?"

He realized that he didn't know what he wanted her to say. Part of him, the part still loyal to Joe, was impressed with how she'd been handling the situation. Another part, the part that had been watching her all night, wanted her to admit that she was getting naked, grinding on clients.

"I didn't book this room to just chat," he said. "I want to see you move."

Destiny gave him one hard second of a glare. The mask slipped entirely, pure Evie, furious and exposed. Then Destiny returned, composed and professional. The transition was so seamless, so quick, that if he hadn't known her for years, he might have missed it.

She stood without a word.

Moving to the center of the room, Destiny positioned herself in front of him and began to dance.

The first thing Sam noticed was her posture. Her spine was straight, shoulders pulled back, chin lifted. Her arms rose fluidly above her head. Joe had mentioned once, years ago, that Evie had taken ballet lessons as a child.

He was seeing the residue of those lessons now. Every movement was precise. She turned slowly, her hips swaying to the music's rhythm, but the sensuality felt planned rather than spontaneous. Her hands traced down her sides, over the velvet of her dress, drawing attention to the curves beneath without ever revealing them. She bent forward slightly, looking back over her shoulder, and the movement should have been

provocative. Instead, it felt like watching a dance recital, the kind where parents sat in folding chairs and applauded at appropriate intervals.

Sam had expected something provocative, intimate, the kind of performance Doe had given him the night before. What Destiny delivered was something else entirely. She maintained her distance, stayed fully clothed, and never touched him. Her movements belonged on a stage with proper lighting and an orchestra, not in a private room designed for far more explicit encounters.

She was using her skills to create distance rather than intimacy, to impress rather than arouse, to remind him that he might have paid for her time but he had purchased nothing else.

He watched with growing irritation but also undeniable attraction. The contradiction churned inside him, anger at her performance and desire for it to become more. He wanted her to approach, to climb onto his lap and move against him the way Doe had. He wanted her to drop the act, even for a moment, but she didn't. She remained in the center of the room, performing for an audience of one as if he were sitting in the back row of a darkened theater rather than close enough to touch.

As the music built toward its conclusion, she finally moved closer. She leaned in, her lips near his ear. His pulse jumped, surely now she would say something real, something meant only for him.

"Time," she said. One word, flat and professional.

Before he could respond, she was already crossing to the control panel. She turned the music off, smoothed her dress, retrieved a key card from somewhere, and gestured toward the door.

"Thank you for your time," she said.

Sam stood there for a moment, feeling as though he'd been outplayed at a game whose rules he didn't fully understand. The dismissal stung more than it should have.

She escorted him out of the Lotus Room, down the hallway, and back to the edge of the VIP lounge. She didn't speak again. At the archway leading back to the main area, she simply walked away without a backward glance.

Sam made his way back to their booth. Jimmy, Arjun, and Gerry were mid-conversation, cocktail glasses scattered across the table between them. Jimmy had progressed to his

third whiskey sour judging by the empties, while Arjun nursed what looked like his second Macallan. Even Gerry had upgraded from club soda to whisky.

Jimmy looked up first, his grin widening. "There he is!" He raised his glass in mock salute. "So? Was she worth it? Did you get the full girlfriend experience or what?"

Sam slipped into his seat, reaching for the water glass someone had helpfully left at his place setting. "Nah," he said after a sip. "All tease, no follow through. Honestly felt like I was sitting through a TED Talk on market segmentation strategies."

"Seriously?" Jimmy's disappointment was almost comical. "But she's gorgeous. I mean, did you at least get a some contact?"

"She stayed fully clothed the entire time," Sam replied, injecting just enough irritation into his voice to sell it. "Very elegant, very sophisticated, very fucking boring for what I paid."

Arjun leaned forward. "What was the rate? If you don't mind my asking. Wendy quoted us eight hundred for thirty minutes, which already seemed steep."

Sam paused, letting the moment build, then delivered it deadpan. "Five thousand."

The table went silent. Even the ambient music seemed to recede.

"Five thousand dollars?" Gerry repeated. "For thirty minutes? That's..." he paused, "that's ten thousand dollars an hour. That's more than a senior partner at a law firm bills."

"That's obscene," Arjun added, though his tone carried more fascination than judgment.

"I mean, what could possibly justify that rate structure? Is she that much better than the other dancers?"

"Apparently she charges what the market will bear," Sam said with a shrug. "And I was stupid enough to pay it."

Jimmy laughed. "Jesus, Sam. Five grand? You should've just booked Wendy or Jade like a normal person. Or hell, Doe seemed pretty great last night from what you said."

"Hindsight's twenty twenty," Sam muttered.

"You Miami boys spend money very freely," Arjun observed, swirling the scotch in his glass. "Five thousand dollars for a disappointment. I don't think I could stomach that expense under any circumstances."

Jimmy was still processing, shaking his head slowly. "But she's so fucking hot, man. I was going to ask if you'd recommend her. I mean, if you're willing to drop five grand, I figured she must be doing something special in those rooms."

“Don’t bother,” Sam said. “Seriously. Stick with Wendy if you want to book someone again. At least she seems like she actually enjoys her work.”

“Did she explain why her rates are so much higher?” Arjun pressed. “I’m genuinely curious about the economic model here. If standard VIP rates are eight hundred for thirty minutes, what justifies a six times multiplier?”

“She said she doesn’t usually do private sessions,” Sam replied. “Implied her rate reflects her limited availability and high demand.”

“Classic artificial scarcity,” Gerry observed. “Drive up the price by restricting supply. It’s actually quite clever from a business perspective, assuming there are enough suckers willing to pay it.”

“Thanks, Gerry,” Sam said.

“No offense intended,” Gerry replied, though his slight smirk suggested otherwise. “But you have to admit, from a pure economics standpoint, you got played. She identified you as someone with money and willingness to spend it, quoted an astronomical figure expecting you to negotiate or decline, and then you just... paid it.”

“Are we done analyzing my poor financial decisions?” Sam asked. “Because I’m aware I got ripped off. I don’t need the full postmortem.”

Jimmy raised both hands. “Hey, no judgment here. Well, maybe a little judgment. But I appreciate you taking one for the team.”

“Although,” Arjun said thoughtfully, “if she’s maintaining that rate structure and still getting clients, she must be doing something right. The market doesn’t sustain that kind of hourly rate unless there’s value proposition somewhere.”

“Maybe for someone else,” Sam said.

He reached for his water glass and took a long drink, his eyes drifting across the VIP lounge. The space had filled up since he’d gone into the Lotus Room. More men in expensive suits occupied the seating areas, more dancers circulated between tables.

His gaze found Destiny almost immediately. She stood near the bar, listening to something George was saying while he prepared drinks. Even from across the room, Sam could see the professional smile on her face, the perfect posture.

George slid two glasses across the bar. Destiny picked them up and turned, carrying them toward a corner booth where two older men in tailored suits sat. She set the drinks down, then settled into the booth beside them.

“Sam?” Jimmy’s voice pulled his attention back to their table. “You still with us?”

“Yeah, sorry. What were you saying?”

“I was saying Wendy agreed to another session,” Jimmy replied, grinning. “She’s finishing up with another client, then she’s all mine.”

“That’s great,” Sam said, forcing enthusiasm into his voice.

“I think I might book some time with Jade,” Arjun added, his earlier nervousness replaced with something approaching confidence. The two Macallans had clearly helped. “She seems very intelligent. We had an interesting conversation about Mumbai earlier.”

“What about you, Gerry?” Jimmy asked. “You going to take the plunge?”

Gerry considered his whisky. “Perhaps. Though I’m more interested in observing the business model than participating in it.”

“That’s Gerry-speak for yes,” Jimmy translated, laughing.

“So how long are you planning to stay?” Sam asked, redirecting his focus to his colleagues.

“At least another hour or two,” Jimmy replied.

“The VIP access alone was five thousand per person,” Gerry pointed out. “We should maximize the value.”

“Spoken like a true procurement director,” Sam observed.

“You know what’s interesting,” Arjun said, his voice taking on the slightly philosophical tone of someone two drinks in, “is how sophisticated this environment is. I expected something more... crude. But the women here are genuinely intelligent. Destiny knew about regression modeling. Jade understood Mumbai’s tech sector. These aren’t just beautiful women dancing. They’re providing something... more.”

“Girlfriend experience,” Jimmy said. “That’s what they call it. You pay for the fantasy that they actually care about you, that you’re not just another wallet.”

“But is it really a fantasy if both parties understand the transaction?” Arjun countered.

“There’s something really honest about it. You pay for their time and attention. They provide it.”

Sam listened with half his attention, the rest focused on tracking Destiny. She’d stood from the corner booth, leaving the two men behind. She moved through the lounge,

stopping briefly to speak with Wendy near the bar, then continuing toward a table where a younger man sat alone, probably mid-thirties.

She sat down across from him without being invited. The man straightened immediately, setting down his drink and giving her his full attention. Sam couldn't hear their conversation from across the room, but he watched the man's body language shift, becoming more animated, more engaged. Within two minutes, they were both standing. Destiny led him toward the hallway where the Lotus Rooms were located.

Sam felt something twist in his chest. Who was this guy? What would she do with him that she hadn't done with him? Would she maintain the same cold professionalism, or did her boundaries shift depending on the client?

"Earth to Sam," Jimmy said, snapping his fingers in front of Sam's face. "You're zoning out, man."

"Sorry," Sam replied. "Rough night."

"Because of Destiny?"

"Among other things."

Wendy appeared at their table. "Ready?" she asked Jimmy, extending her hand.

Jimmy stood immediately, downing the rest of his whiskey sour. "Absolutely. Lead the way."

Sam watched them depart toward the Lotus Rooms, then returned his attention to his water glass. Arjun was explaining something about predictive modeling to Gerry, who seemed genuinely interested despite his earlier skepticism. The conversation flowed around Sam without requiring his participation.

The next time Sam checked his watch, it was 11:47 PM. Destiny had been in the Lotus Room with that younger man for about forty minutes now. What was happening in there? Thirty minutes passed as they continued chatting. Jimmy returned, looking satisfied and significantly more relaxed than when he'd left. He dropped into the booth with a contented sigh.

"Gentlemen, that was worth every penny," he declared. "Wendy is a professional in every sense of the word."

Jade appeared at their table next, directing her attention toward Gerry. "Still thinking about it?" she asked.

Gerry hesitated, then stood. "Why not? It's been an unusual evening. Might as well commit fully."

Jade smiled and took his hand, leading him away. Jimmy watched them go, then turned to Sam and Arjun.

"This is the best client entertainment we've ever done," Jimmy declared. "We should make this a quarterly thing."

Sam didn't respond, his attention drawn back across the room as Destiny emerged from the hallway. She paused at the bar to exchange a few words with George before continuing toward a seating area where three men in their fifties sat smoking cigars.

She approached their table, was immediately welcomed, and settled into the booth beside them. One of the men offered her a cigar. She declined with a smile, gesturing toward something on the table instead. Whatever she said made all three men laugh.

Sam watched, unable to look away. She was working. This was her job. She moved from client to client, providing attention and companionship and whatever else they paid for, and she did it with complete professionalism.

Gerry returned thirty minutes later looking pleased with himself. Arjun then had his turn.

The guys continued talking, the conversation flowing easily as the drinks kept coming. Sam participated minimally, offering comments when directly addressed but otherwise maintaining silence. His attention kept drifting across the room, tracking Destiny.

She stood from the booth with the three businessmen, touching one of them lightly on the shoulder before departing. She moved toward the bar again, this time ordering something for herself. George prepared what looked like a vodka soda with lime, which she accepted with a nod of thanks.

A silver-haired man in an expensive suit approached her at the bar. She turned toward him with that professional smile, immediately engaged in conversation. Within three minutes, she was leading him toward the Lotus Room hallway.

This was the second private session he'd witnessed. How many sessions did she do in a typical night? How much money was she making?

The math was staggering if she actually charged most clients her premium rate. Two or three sessions per night at five thousand dollars each meant ten to fifteen thousand per shift. If she worked Thursday through Saturday as Wendy had indicated, that was thirty to forty-five thousand per weekend. Over a hundred and fifty thousand per month.

He suddenly thought about Evie's visit to his apartment later that night. What would he say? What would she say? Would she maintain the Destiny persona or finally drop it? Would she be angry, defensive, or coldly pragmatic?

"Gentlemen," Sam said, making a decision, "I'm going to head out now. You guys stay, enjoy yourselves. The tab's covered."

"You sure?" Jimmy asked. "We can all leave together if you want."

"No, stay," Sam insisted. "Seriously. Make the most of the VIP access."

After handshakes and goodbyes, Sam flagged George down and gestured for the bill. The bartender materialized moments later with a leather folder containing the damage. Sam opened it, scanning the itemized list.

He pulled out two cards, sliding the corporate card toward George for the drinks, then his personal card for Destiny's fee.

George processed both transactions, returning moments later with receipts for signature. Sam scrawled his name across both, added a modest tip to the drinks bill, and pocketed his cards.

Sam then made his way across the lounge toward the stairs. The descent felt longer than the ascent had, each step carrying him further from Destiny.

The main floor assaulted him with renewed intensity after the VIP lounge's restraint. Bass thundered, lights strobed, bodies pressed close in the crowd.

He pushed through the exit doors, grateful for the rush of cool air when they finally opened onto the street. The night was clear, temperature pleasant, the kind of Miami evening that usually lifted his spirits. Tonight it barely registered.

The valet took his ticket without comment.

While he waited, Sam thought about the coming confrontation. The transformation from Evie to Destiny had been so complete, so thorough, that he wondered if the woman he'd known even existed anymore, or if Destiny had consumed her entirely.

The Porsche arrived, engine purring as the young valet hopped out. Sam tipped him and slid into the driver's seat.

The dashboard clock glowed 1:32 AM. Two and a half hours until 4 AM.

Sam started the engine and pulled out into Miami's nighttime traffic.

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3:47 AM glowed from the cable box beneath Sam's TV. He sat on his sofa watching SportsCenter with the volume low enough that he could hear the occasional car passing on the street below.

He shifted his position, suddenly aware of how much energy he'd expended over the last few hours. After leaving Elysium, he'd arrived home and immediately launched into a cleaning frenzy. He'd scrubbed his bathroom sink, swept every corner of the hardwood floors, and vacuumed his area rug.

In the kitchen, he'd attacked a three-day pile of dishes, wiped down countertops, and even cleaned out the refrigerator, discarding takeout containers with contents he no longer recognized.

All of it had been busywork, a distraction from what awaited him at 4 AM.

The sportscaster on screen was dissecting the Marlins' extra-inning victory, their fifth in a row despite a losing record and injuries to three starting pitchers. "Bottom of the tenth, two outs, down by one, and Hernandez connects on that fastball. Incredible moment for the Marlins and their fans."

Sam registered the information without processing it. His mind kept returning to Destiny, to Evie, to the woman who would arrive at his door in less than fifteen minutes. He replayed the scene in the VIP lounge, Evie looking like a lingerie model, moving through the room with confidence that seemed bone-deep rather than assumed.

And then the Lotus Room. Her cold professionalism, the distance she'd maintained while dancing, the dismissal at the end, as if he were just another forgettable client.

What version of Evie would arrive? The professional from the VIP lounge, or the furious woman who'd texted "fuck you" on his phone? Or would she send a third persona altogether, one he hadn't met yet?

Not that it mattered. She would arrive angry, stay angry, and leave angry. That much was certain.

The television showed a replay of the game winning home run. The Marlins' dugout emptied, players rushing the field to mob their teammate at home plate.

Sam had spent his career navigating difficult conversations. Years in enterprise software sales had taught him that every major deal began with resistance. No client ever said yes until they'd said no at least twice. Success depended on anticipating objections,

redirecting them, finding the hidden pathway to agreement. Tonight would require the same approach.

He'd mentally drafted his strategy on the drive home. No matter how she opened, he'd steer the conversation to the same destination, what was happening in those private rooms, and why she was lying about it?

"Nobody gave them a chance," the announcer repeated, "but that's why they play the games."

The sports cliché snagged on something in Sam's mind. The Marlins were the underdog, the team nobody expected to win, yet here they were, victorious against the odds. Joe was like that.

Sam had never quite understood what Evie saw in Joe. Joe wasn't rich or outrageously handsome. He didn't have Sam's confidence or sales skills. He didn't excel at anything specific. He was just... average. Average height, average build, average job at an average company. Joe's most remarkable trait was his unremarkable reliability. He showed up on time, returned calls promptly, remembered birthdays. He was the human equivalent of a Toyota Camry, dependable, unexciting, blending into the background. And yet somehow, he'd landed Evie Sinclair.

The buzzer cut through his thoughts, an electric rasp from the intercom panel near his door. His pulse jumped. He checked the cable box. 3:52 AM.

Sam muted the television and crossed to the intercom. He pressed the button without speaking, then moved to his front door and positioned himself with one eye to the peephole.

The fisheye lens distorted the hallway, stretching it into a curved tunnel. The elevator chimed and its doors slid open. A hooded figure emerged, head down, backpack slung over one shoulder. The person moved toward his door, then stopped directly in front of it. No knock came so he opened the door.

Evie walked past him without a word, her shoulder brushing his chest. She wore black leggings, a gray hoodie, and Nike running shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. No makeup, no jewelry, nothing of Destiny remained except perhaps the posture of her spine.

Sam closed the door, threw the deadbolt, and turned to speak.

The impact came without warning.

Evie's fist connected with his face, a closed-knuckle blow that landed half on his chin and half on the corner of his mouth. The force drove his head back against the door with a dull thud. Pain bloomed across his jaw, followed by the metallic taste of blood.

"Jesus!" Sam raised a hand to his mouth, fingers coming away red where his lip had split against his teeth. He blinked, more stunned than angry, the pain secondary to the shock.

Evie was already cradling her right hand, face contorted as she flexed her fingers.

"God damn it," she hissed, shaking her hand.

For one unguarded moment, she looked like what she was, a woman who'd never punched anyone before, unprepared for how much it would hurt. Fear flashed across her features, quickly replaced by renewed determination. She straightened, drawing her injured hand against her stomach.

"You made me bleed," Sam said, touching his lip again.

"You deserve it. You deserve worse."

Sam reached for a napkin from the side table, pressing it to his split lip. "Do you feel better now?"

"No." Her eyes narrowed. "I have twenty minutes. Maybe less."

"What?"

"Twenty minutes," she repeated. "I have to assume I'm being tracked and followed at all times. By the Bureau, by the Maddox brothers, by their security team. I need to be back inside my expected pattern, my car, my apartment, my bed, by a believable hour." She glanced at her watch. "There's no time for a long conversation, so you're going to listen."

"I-"

"You paid thousands of dollars to buy your way into the VIP section. You walked upstairs with coworkers and clients. You sat in the lounge for hours drinking scotch. You bought private time with me in front of everyone." Her voice rose. "You are the biggest idiot and backstabber I have ever had the misfortune to know."

Sam dabbed at his lip, watching her pace. She moved like a caged animal, all contained energy and sharp edges.

"Which part of 'never go back to Elysium' did you not understand?" She pressed her palms together as if praying for patience. "I never thought you were the smartest person I knew, but I thought you had a survival instinct. You could have gotten us both killed."

“You’re exaggerating-”

“The Maddox brothers watch their VIP guests the way casinos watch high rollers,” Evie cut him off. “Vincent remembers faces. George remembers drinks. Marcus takes note of who spends what. Now they have your name, your employer, and your credit card on file. Every dollar you spent made you more interesting to them, and men like that don’t forget interesting.”

“What do you think happens if they decide you’re not just a client?” she continued. “What if they think you’re law enforcement? Or competition? Or just someone asking too many questions? These aren’t people who send strongly worded letters, Sam. They make problems disappear.”

“Are you finished?” he asked, the napkin still pressed to his mouth.

“Not remotely.”

“Well, it’s my turn anyway.” He tossed the bloodied napkin onto the side table. “I was worried about Joe. Your story never added up. Let’s review what you told me that night in this apartment. You serve drinks and chat with clients. Your job is to listen. The bonus is a hundred thousand. The assignment is three months, maybe six.” He ticked off each point on his fingers. “The FBI story is real, and the extension is real, you told the truth about that. But nobody gets into the VIP section of the most exclusive club in the city to pour drinks and make small talk. You weren’t telling the whole truth. I know it, and Joe deserves to know it too.”

Evie went still. Even her breathing seemed to pause. “Is that what this is about? Joe?”

“Yes.” Sam wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “He called me tonight, right before I saw you at Elysium.”

“He what?”

“An agent knocked on his door earlier tonight. Flashed a badge, said the assignment had been extended by three months, and left.” Sam’s voice dropped, mimicking Joe’s cadence. “‘I was doing so fucking well, Sam. Counting down the weeks.’” He shook his head. “He’s been trying to turn himself into someone better for you, and meanwhile you’re up there in the VIP section doing God knows what.”

“What do you mean, ‘trying to turn himself into someone better for me’?” Evie asked.

Sam moved to the couch and sat down. His jaw throbbed where she’d hit him. “He joined that climbing gym you were always talking about, started meal prepping, started reading

those relationship books with the stupid titles. The ten love languages. Men are from Mars and women are from Venus. All that self-improvement garbage.”

A part of Sam found it pathetic, but a larger part felt genuine sorrow for his friend. This was what happened when you were just a regular guy married to a woman who looked like Evie. You spent your life trying to deserve her.

“Joe’s worried you’re going to leave him when you finish this assignment,” Sam added. “So he’s trying to be better for you.”

Evie’s shoulders dropped. She moved to the arm of the couch and sat down, the fury draining from her posture.

“I begged for them to send Joe a message about the extension,” she said quietly. “I’m glad they told him something rather than nothing, even if they did it badly.”

“Who’s them?”

“My handlers.”

“So you’re really FBI.”

“I told you that.”

Sam sensed the opening and pressed forward. “What are you really doing in the VIP, Evie?”

“Gathering intelligence. I told you that.”

“I was there Wednesday night too,” Sam said. “Booked time with Doe. She danced for me, got completely naked, straddled me, kissed my neck, even let me touch her body and squeeze her ass.” He paused, watching Evie’s face. “I don’t believe you when you say the rooms up there are for talking.”

“Doe does what she wants. I’m not Doe.”

“You’re in the same role, dancing for the same clients, using the same rooms.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Then explain the difference.”

Evie stood and walked straight up to him.

“The VIP section isn’t what you think it is,” she said. “It’s where government officials, celebrities, and business leaders network and make deals away from public scrutiny. Nothing but talking happens in my private rooms. Some girls like Doe do more, but I don’t. I listen for key information. That’s my job.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Sam replied.

“No. What’s bullshit is that you went to Elysium to help Joe. You went for yourself. That makes you a bad friend and not a good person.” Her eyes locked with his. “Your dick has always done all your thinking, but I thought this time you would understand the danger and respect it. Tell me the truth, Sam. Did you book that room to see me naked and touch me?”

Sam didn’t flinch and didn’t deny it. Denial would insult them both.

“I wanted what the other men get,” he said after a moment.

“What does that mean?”

“What the other guys get. What Doe gave me.”

“Say it.” Evie’s expression hardened. “If you’re going to be this person, at least have the balls to say what you mean.”

Sam met her gaze. “I want to fuck you.”

Something flickered across her face, disgust, certainly, but also something else.

Disappointment, maybe, as if he’d confirmed her worst suspicions about him.

“No.” Evie stepped back. “Absolutely not. No way in hell.”

“You’re a stripper in the VIP section of a sex club,” Sam said. “You’re surrounded by it every night. Two months straight. Two months without Joe.” He shook his head. “You’re going to crack. Two months without your husband, surrounded by rich men who want you. People crack. If you haven’t fucked someone yet, you will. That’s how it works with the hottest girls at these clubs. I’m only saying out loud what’s coming.” He stepped forward. “Better me than a stranger. I’ll keep the secret.”

“You disgust me.”

“Joe’s going to crack too,” Sam continued. “Two months without sex is the longest you’ve ever gone, right? And he’s a healthy guy. Sooner or later someone at the gym, a coworker, a friend of a friend. Nobody comes out of this clean.”

As he spoke, Sam wondered who he was trying to convince, Evie or himself. Was he justifying his own desires, his own betrayal of Joe? Or did he genuinely believe what he was saying?

Evie’s eyes glistened. “You’re a pig. And you’re making a big mistake.” She drew herself up. “If you tell Joe anything, he’ll do something stupid like walk into Elysium demanding

to see his wife. He'll get all three of us killed, or we'll spend the rest of our lives in witness protection. And even if none of that happens, you'll have destroyed my marriage and your friendship with Joe in one move."

"Your marriage is going to be completely different by the time you finish this assignment," Sam said flatly. "It might already be over. Six months of living as someone else, of doing whatever you're doing up there. You think you're going to walk back into that condo and pick up where you left off? You're not the same woman who left. Joe's not the same man either." He leaned against the wall. "The marriage I'd be ending isn't the one you had. That's already gone. The only question is who gets to be honest about it."

Evie stared at him for a long moment. Then she unzipped her backpack. Without a word, she upended it over the floor. Bound stacks of hundred-dollar bills tumbled onto the hardwood, landing with dull thuds.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars," she said. "You get every dollar. This is the best-case outcome. You never set foot in Elysium again. You forget what you saw. You forget this conversation ever happened. When this is over, I tell Joe everything myself."

Sam looked at the money scattered across his floor, then back at Evie. She'd rehearsed this moment in the car, he realized. She'd come prepared to buy his silence.

"I'm not interested," he said.

"It's cash," Evie said. "Untraceable. Tax free."

"I don't want your money."

"Then what do you want?"

"The truth," Sam said. "I don't buy your answer about the private rooms. Downstairs has cameras everywhere. Doe told me the upstairs rooms are completely private. I understand why you act like you're watched around the clock, but nobody pays thousands of dollars, and rooms don't get advertised as private, if all that happens inside is conversation."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Twenty-five thousand seems like a lot to pay for my silence if all you're doing is talking to these guys."

"It's not about what I'm doing," Evie said. "It's about protecting the operation."

"I think you're lying about what happens in those rooms," Sam said, not letting go of the subject. "I think you're doing a lot more than talking."

“Based on what evidence?”

“Based on what I saw with Doe. Based on the money they’re charging. And I think Joe deserves the truth.”

Evie’s expression shifted from anger to disbelief. “Are you blackmailing me? Are you going to tell Joe where I work if I don’t sleep with you?”

“You have two options,” Sam said. “Either you quit tonight and tell Joe everything, or you give me what the other men get. If you refuse both, I tell Joe what I know and it all blows up. I know you don’t want to destroy Joe, and neither do I, so the smart thing is the second option.” He shrugged. “It’s your choice. I’m only putting a price on what you’re already doing.”

Evie stared at him. “I thought I knew you... you’re a bastard. You’re selfish. If you cared about Joe at all, you wouldn’t be putting me in this position.”

“You don’t care about Joe either, or you’d never have taken the assignment.”

It was a cheap shot, and Sam saw it land. Evie flinched as if he’d struck her, color draining from her face.

“That’s not fair,” she whispered.

“Isn’t it? You chose this.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then explain it to me.”

Sam watched her, trying to read her thoughts. Was she considering his offer? Was she calculating what it would cost her to walk away from the assignment? Or was she simply trying to find a way to escape this apartment, to put as much distance as possible between them?

Evie checked her phone and swore under her breath. “I have to go. I’ve been here too long already.” She zipped the empty backpack and slung it over her shoulder. “I need time to think. I’ll come back next week, same day, same time.”

“And?”

“And don’t set foot in Elysium. Don’t say a word to Joe.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s all you’re getting tonight.”

She moved toward the door, stepping over the piles of cash without a second glance. The money lay forgotten on the floor.

“Put some ice on that,” she said, and then she was gone.

Sam locked the door behind her and stood with his back against it.

He made no move to collect the cash, made no move toward the freezer for ice.

Instead, he slid down the door until he was sitting on the floor, his lip throbbing, his mind racing with what he’d done and what might come next.